

Orpheus: From a Mythological Figure to a Thracian King-Priest

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Abstract

The Thracian institution of the king-priest is attested since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. This study presents Orpheus not just as a talented poet and singer, but also as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War, who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. The solar circles, some of them oriented towards the sunrise, found on numerous rock sanctuaries in Thrace, show that Sun-related practices were present in Thrace millennia before Orpheus and they were one of the key elements of his philosophy, just as the idea of bodily purification, which ultimately lead to enlightenment and divine inspiration. It is also reasonable to assume that his teaching involved a doctrine, probably only for initiates, related to the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body.

Keywords: Orpheus, Thracian religion, sun worship, solar circles, archaeoastronomy.

1. Orpheus as a mythological figure

In Thrace the institution of the king-priest is attested not just archaeologically since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC through the Valchitran Treasure (16th-12th century BC) and the numerous double axes found throughout Bulgarian territory, but also in written accounts as well.¹ The idea of Orpheus being a king-priest is overlooked, because today Orpheus is considered to be an entirely mythological figure and is widely associated only with music and poetry. But until 1870 Troy was also considered by many to be mythological – that is was a work of fiction and it never existed.²

¹ See Bondzhev, 2024b.

² After its conquest Troy was later destroyed by fire (c. 950 BC) and earthquakes (c. 500 AD). After the 13th century it was buried and lost from view (Fitton, 2019). In a lecture Donald Kagan (2007) says the following: “If you walked into the leading universities in the world, there would probably be Germans in the 1850s and you went to the classics people, and you said, ‘Well, you know Homer wrote about these places, Mycenae and other places. Can you tell me where that was?’ They would say, ‘You silly fellow, that’s just stories, that’s mythology, that’s poetry. There never was an Agamemnon, there never was a Mycenae, there isn’t any such thing.’ Then in 1870, a German businessman by the name of Heinrich Schliemann, who had not had the benefit of a university education and didn’t know what a fool and how ignorant he was, believed Homer, and he said he wanted to look for Troy.”

Ivan Linforth discerned two contributory sources to the religious tradition about Orpheus, two independent cells which united to produce it. One of these two elements was the religion of the mysteries. The other is the legend of Orpheus the magical singer, who with his song and lyre could charm and subdue men and beasts and all nature, who could even bend the wills of gods of the lower world by the sweetness of his music.³ Linforth concludes that “like other legends it may have had a kernel of reality, but it was enriched with elements drawn from folk lore and developed by the play of the Greek imagination.”⁴ That is why my research will not focus on legends.



Figure 1. Orpheus in the presence of Thracians. Red-Figure Pottery, 5th century BC. Archaeological Museum in Siena, Italy



Figure 2. Orpheus and other Thracians wearing a Phrygian cap
Red-Figure Pottery, 5th century BC. Vicenza, Italy

³ Cf. Afonasinina's statement (2007: 30) that Orpheus' attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice is certainly reminiscent of shamanistic practices of rescuing souls. He failed to save his wife, while shamans usually succeed in their adventure. Thus Orpheus should not be considered a shaman, as many scholars in the past have done.

⁴ Linforth, 1941: 293-294.

2. Orpheus: A Thracian King-Priest

The Thracian ethnic origin of Orpheus is indisputable. Strabo points that it is “the Thracians, among whom the Orphic rites had their beginning” (10.3.16) and that Orpheus belongs to the Ciconian tribe (7.8.18). Diodorus (5.77.3) talks about “the Cicones, whence Orpheus came.” Virgil (*Ecloques* 6.30) writes about Orpheus being tied with the Ciconian town of Ismarus.⁵ Aristotle (*Peplos* Fr. 48 [46]) states that the Ciconians buried Orpheus in Ciconia.



Figure 3. Thracian tribes. Map template: Fol, 2008. Tribes location: mine

One of the greatest historical contributions of the Thracians in European and world culture is called Orpheus.⁶ Orpheus is much more than a talented poet and singer. He is a religious reformer, a priest, a Teacher, who imparts valuable knowledge to humanity. The name Orpheus was first mentioned in the middle of the 6th century BC by the poet Ibycus (Fr. 10a). The name is accompanied by the definition “the renowned“, which shows that it is a matter of recording a long oral tradition. The inscriptions from the Parian Marble (IG XII 5.444) from 264-263 BC point that in 1398 BC Orpheus makes known his own poetry, or eight centuries before the first written sources.

Diodorus (3.65) describes Orpheus as a heir to a royal family. After devoting all his time to self-improvement, he continues his education at one of the best schools on the planet – the one in Memphis, Egypt (1.96), becoming “superior of all men in gifts and education” (3.65). Thus, it should not surprise us that a heir to a royal family, having received the best priestly education one could have, later becomes a king-priest. Apollonius (1.34) points that Orpheus was

⁵ Ismarus was first mentioned by Homer, who speaks of Ismarus of the Cicones (*Od.* 9.39), where Maron, son of Evantius and priest of Apollo, who protects Ismarus, lives (*Od.* 9.197). Herodotus’s account (7.109), of Lake Ismaris, situated between Maroneia and the Thassosians’ city of Strome, places the hydronyme to the west of Maroneia, thus extending the perimeter of the name used. Apollodorus (3.15.4) speaks of the son of Eumolpus, Ismarus, who went to the Thracian king Tegerius and married his daughter. Here, it is undoubtedly noteworthy that the name Ismar is associated with the Thracian royal institution. Strabo (7.43) speaks of Xanthea, Maroneia, and Ismarus, which were cities of the Cicones. Ismarus, however, he says, is today called Ismara; it is close to Maroneia. And here nearby, also, is the lake Ismaris. Apparently, Strabo also links Ismarus/Ismara to the Thracian Cicones by claiming that, like Xanthea, Maroneia was a Ciconian city; he also mentions Lake Ismaris (Detschew, 1976: 217; Isaac, 1986; Laukopoulou, 2004; Porozhanov, 2009).

⁶ Fol, 2008: 6-7.

ruler of the Bistones and Conon (*Narrations* 45) – ruler of Macedonians and Odrysians. As a man with power and influence Orpheus focused on his religious reform.

Euripides (*Bacchae* 711-747) describes one of Dionysus' bloody rituals:

They [the maenads or Bacchantes] at the appointed time began to wave the *thyrsus* for their Bacchic rites, calling on Iacchus [Dionysus] . . . They, with hands that bore no weapon of steel, attacked our cattle as they browsed. . . . [They] rent the heifers limb from limb. Before thy eyes there would have been hurling of ribs and hoofs this way and that; and strips of flesh, all blood-bedabbled, dripped as they hung from the pine-branches. Wild bulls, that glared but now with rage along their horns, found themselves tripped up, dragged down to earth by countless maidens' hands. The flesh upon their limbs was stripped therefrom quicker than thou couldn't have closed thy royal eye-lids.

According to Anna Afonasiina, Orpheus never entered the state of trance, a kind of collective madness (inspired by the god),⁷ typical to Bacchantes, who played on tympana. Orpheus changed the religious rites in the way quite opposite to the ecstatic practices. The divine gift of Orpheus and ecstasy, associated with it, is better understood in Platonic sense: as a higher ecstasy, quite different from the divine madness of the Bacchantes.⁸

Diodorus (3.65.6) writes that “Orpheus also made many changes in the practices and for that reason the rites which had been established by Dionysus were also called ‘Orphic.’” Plato (*Laws* 782c) defines what an “Orphic life” is: first, when the “offerings to the gods consisted, not of animals, but of cakes of meal and grain steeped in honey, and other such bloodless sacrifices” and second, “keeping wholly to inanimate food and, contrariwise, abstaining wholly from things animate” (needed for bodily purification).⁹ Pythagoreans believed that through purification humans could join the psychic force that pervaded the cosmos.¹⁰ Numerous philosophical teachings believed that this force, which ultimately leads to divine inspiration, exists everywhere around us, but is most present at sunrise. According to Eratosthenes (*Catasterismi* 24):

He [Orpheus] did not honor Dionysus, but considered Helios the greatest of the gods and called him Apollo. Arising at night, toward dawn, he would climb Mt. Pangaion and await the sunrise, so that he might be the first to see the sun.

Although the practices related to the sunrise were later professed by the Pythagoreans, Essenes, Bogomils in Bulgaria and their ideological successors in France – the Cathars, this ancient tradition is present in Thrace much earlier than Orpheus.¹¹ In Perperek (Perperikon), where the sunrise is perfectly to be seen, the found ceramics with images of the Sun attest that the solar cult

⁷ Cf. Apollodorus 3.5.1-3, where a collective psychosis is vividly described.

⁸ Afonasiina, 2007: 29. Plato *Ion* 533e-534a: “. . . the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession – as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers – that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report.”

⁹ Prohibition of meat-eating by Orpheus is probably referred to by Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032: “Orpheus taught us the mystic rites and the horrid nature of murder” (West, 1983: 16, n. 42; Schibli, 1990: 123).

¹⁰ Gorman, 1978: 185; Dombrowski, 2014: 540. Probably that is why Plotinus (3rd century AD), who was a Neo-Platonist, but also shared Pythagorean ideas, and was obsessed with purification, warned about food which obfuscates the astral body of the psyche (Gorman, 1979: 196). Purification was also practiced by the Manichean elite (Gilhus, 2014).

¹¹ See Bondzhev, 2024a.

exists from at least the 4th millennium BC. Solar circles, some of them oriented towards the sunrise, are to be found on numerous rock sanctuaries: Paleokastro, Mochukovi Kamani (Elhovo), Kamaka (M. Tarnovo), Orizari (Sliven).¹²



Figure 4. Solar circles on Kamaka rock sanctuary.
They exist from at least the middle of the 3rd millennium BC

Figure 4.1. The solar circles from another angle. Fol, 2007: 159

Sun-related practices in Thrace are attested even after almost a millennium after Orpheus. Before being finally turned into a tomb, just as many other Thracian tombs, Golyama Arsenalka (end of 5th century BC) was used as a temple. Archaeoastronomy shows that one of the practices was related to the winter solstice when the rays of the Sun reached the specially calculated and constructed central circle on the floor of the domed chamber.¹³ It is assumed that at that particular moment the king-priest stood in the circle and accumulated, what has been believed to be, sacred and enlightening solar force – a common practice on many sacred places around the world. Sergei Ignatov concludes, that the solar cult in Thrace, obviously, cannot be an agricultural cult, as 19th-century anthropologists claimed, but a doctrine, probably only for initiates, related to the cycle of the soul after it leaves the body.¹⁴

¹² See Fol, 2007. Many of the solar circles are located mainly in Strandzha and Sakar Mountains. Sometimes traces of an attempt to acquire quern-stones are misinterpreted as solar circles. But sometimes, as on Paleokastro, both are present. Some solar circles are located on such a hard to reach places, that it makes no sense of them being an attempt to acquire a quern-stone.

¹³ For the Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari being oriented towards the winter solstice see Dermendzhiev, 2007: 157; Bondzhev, 2023b: 114.

¹⁴ Ignatov, 2023: 27. This statement contradicts the hypothesis long expressed in Bulgarian historiography (Mihailov, 1951; 1972: 250-251; see Popov, 2014: 14), which assumed that Herodotus' term "immortality" (4.93), relating the Thracian (Getic) belief system, does not indicate the belief in the immortality of the soul. Whatever the truth is, I have *infinite* respect for the studies of all colleagues from the past and present, without whose efforts my research would have *not* been possible.



Figure 5. Thracian Tomb Golyama Arsenalka located in the Valley of the Thracian Kings

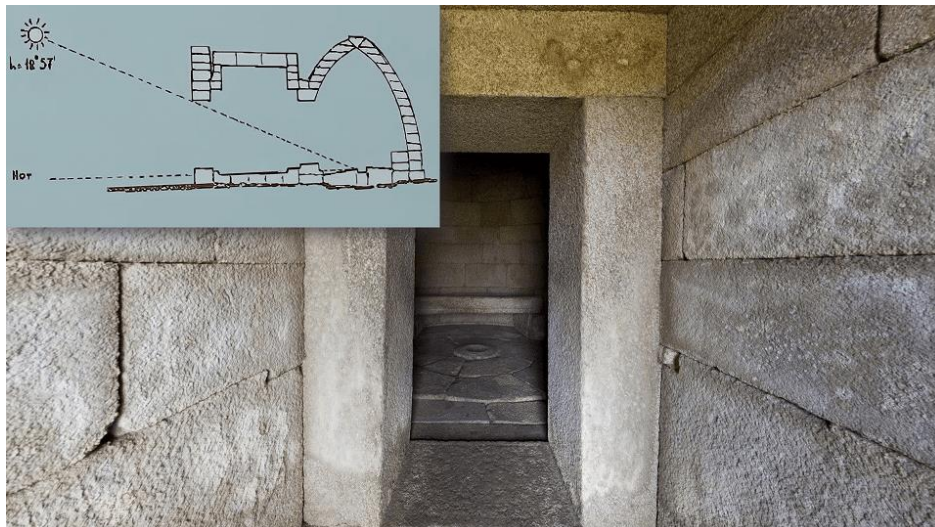


Figure 6. Thracian Tomb Golyama Arsenalka's antechamber and domed chamber

Figure 6.1. Position of the Sun at winter solstice

The texts on the Orphic gold tablets from the 4th century BC serve as a guide for the soul in the afterlife.¹⁵ According to Herodotus (2.81), Orphic practices are close to the Egyptian and Pythagorean. The Orphic texts are undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.¹⁶ Ignatov makes a remarkable comment about the essence of the book:¹⁷

My thesis supervisor believed that the main purpose of the *Book of the Dead* was to practice before going beyond [in the afterlife]. I think that he indeed practiced it for the last ten years of his life – to go beyond and come back. You practice it, so that [at the moment of death] you don't get confused where you are heading; and so that you

¹⁵ Graf & Johnston, 2007.

¹⁶ Common plots are: quenching the thirst of souls with cold water, a ban on passing certain paths, guards asking questions, underground kings (Merkelbach, 1999: 5ff).

¹⁷ Ignatov, 2021: 21. Ignatov is the founder of Egyptology in Bulgaria and Minister of Education (2009-2013).

don't get scared. Because people get scared and lonely in this moment [of death]¹⁸ . . . This [process] is being practiced in the whole world, not just in Egypt. What we call true meditation has to do with tapping into a higher reality.

Here Ignatov is obviously alluding to the mystical concept, known since ancient times, of a soul journey.¹⁹ Unfortunately, we could only speculate whether Orpheus possessed such knowledge (something he might have learned or mastered in Thrace, Egypt or somewhere else) and whether something similar was practiced not just by the Greek Orphics, but prior to them by the Thracian followers of Orpheus as well.²⁰

3. Orpheus' legacy

Historical reality about Orpheus never ceased to be mixed with legendary accounts. In the 3rd century BC Apollonius Rhodius wrote his *Argonautica* and two centuries later Virgil and Ovid introduced Orpheus' failed attempt to bring his wife Eurydice out of the underworld.²¹ Today Orpheus is known for the mythological – mainly with the legend of the singer charming the animals. Poetry, singing and music were undoubtedly essential elements of Orpheus' personality, but they were used as tools to transmit knowledge – sacred texts are more easily remembered through rhyme and music.²²

Few have looked at the written accounts from the perspective describing Orpheus as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War (14th-13th century BC?), who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. We might assume that he tried to spread the concept related to the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body and, respectively, the necessity of establishing a personal connection with the Creator (instead of worshiping some deity) – bodily purification and the sacred, enlightening solar force would assist that process.²³ I would be surprised if these concepts were completely new to the Thracian lands. The existence of the practices related to the sunrise millennia before Orpheus rather hints to the fact that at least some (Proto-) Thracian priests might have been familiar with the concepts of bodily purification as well.

It seems reasonable to assume that Orpheus' education in Memphis might have helped him to further deepen his spiritual understanding and when he returned back to Thrace, this time from the position of a king-priest, he started to initiate not just Thracians, but Greeks as well.

¹⁸ Cf. Gorman (1979: 202): "Hell for the majority of later Pythagoreans was simply a state when the psyche of the departed does not know what to do once it has been ejected from the body. It wanders in a twilight world of ignorance until it is automatically reborn again."

¹⁹ On shamanism (although I prefer the word "initiate", instead of "shaman", because the latter is being used as a general expression applicable to the magico-religious life of all primitive peoples) and entering the spirit world see Meuli, 1935; Chadwick, 1942; Eliade, 1964; Lewis, 1971; Burkert, 1972: 120-165; Dodds 1973; Burkert 1996: 67-69; Humphrey 1996; Afonasiu 2007; Bondzhev 2023a. Note Burkert's (2004: 74) statement, where he called the opposing views among scholars "battlefield between rationalists and mystics".

²⁰ According to Kindstrand (1981: 18), "it is notable that when barbarians, known for their wisdom, arrive in Greece, they always come from the North and their wisdom is displayed in the religious sphere, connected in most cases with the cult of Apollo. We may here recall Orpheus who came to Greece from Thrace".

²¹ Cf. Afonasiu's statement (2007: 30), that Orpheus' attempt to rescue Eurydice is certainly reminiscent of shamanistic practices of rescuing souls. Orpheus failed in his adventure: apparently he did not have enough experience.

²² Fol, 2020: 72.

²³ Cf. Plotinus (3rd century AD), who was a Pythagorean and was obsessed with purification – warns about food which obfuscates the astral body of the psyche (Gorman 1979: 196).

Because such knowledge, which is ultimately oriented towards human enlightenment, should not have national or ethnic boundary.

But did Orpheus succeed in reforming the old religious belief system? Probably to a certain extent – old and new beliefs continued to exist for centuries. The sacrifices remained: even a millennium later Cotys I (384/3-360 BC) was offering sacrifices to the gods (Athenaeus 12.42), as was Dromichaetes (300-280 BC) (Diod. 21.12.4), and sacrificial horses were buried in or around Thracian king tombs.²⁴ At the same time the horse was considered to be a solar animal – the driver of the solar chariot to carry the spirit of the deceased to the Sun.

Whether and to what extent Orpheus could be given credit for the Thracian belief in the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body – we might only speculate. But this belief is clearly attested by Pomponius Mela (2.18):

Some Thracians – and certainly the Getae – are wild and absolutely prepared to die. A range of belief brings this readiness into being. Some individuals think that the souls of the dead will return; others think that even if they do not return, souls still are not obliterated but go to a happier place . . . and Solinus (10.1-2):

Those who sedulously wish to learn of the barbarian Thracians will easily discover that there is disregard of life among them. This is the result of their system of beliefs. Every one of them agrees to a voluntary death, while not a few of them think that their souls return. Others think that their souls are not destroyed by death but become more blessed.

Another confirmation is Herodotus' account (5.4), from which also Pomponius and Solinus most probably got theirs, describing how the Trausians lament when a child is born and celebrate during funerals, because the deceased "is now in perfect bliss."

Purification practices among Thracians are attested by Stabo (7.3.3), who cites Posidonius's account, that the Moesi "in accordance with their religion they abstain from eating any living thing, and therefore from their flocks as well; and that they use as food honey and milk and cheese." Examples of Sun-related practices in Thracian Tombs have already been given. That the Sun (Helios) was venerated by the Thracians is also attested by Sophocles (Fr. 523 = Schol. *Il.* 13.705).²⁵

4. Conclusion

Orpheus is not just as a talented poet and singer, but also as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War, who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. Orpheus' education in Memphis might have helped him to further deepen his understanding in the sacred and enlightening solar force reaching Earth, especially through the sunrise, but that tradition was already present in Thrace millennia before him. In addition, bodily purification and the doctrine of the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body seem to be part of his philosophy as well and we might assume that much later presence of this philosophy among Thracians is, at least to some extent, due to his teaching.

²⁴ Gergova, 2013: 11.

²⁵ Based on Eisele's translation (1909: 255), Alexander Fol (2002: 48) comments that Sophocles' fragment could be understood as an Orphic interpretation of the Sun as a source of sacred force.

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